

A "NEW MOVEMENT" IN MUSIC

Boyd Neel Orchestra is Spearhead

EVERY New Zealander to whom music means something must go and hear the Boyd Neel Orchestra while it is here if he possibly can; and he must stretch that "possibly" as far as it will go. That's poor advice to give people who live far away from the few places the orchestra will visit, I know; and it comes rather badly from someone who has already greedily listened to two rehearsals and two concerts. But I believe that the Boyd Neel Orchestra is a phenomenon of a kind that occurs only rarely in cultural history, and then only in one of those situations where many circumstances coincide and make it look as if history, too, has gone in for Planning.

"Epoch-making" is the usual word. "Epoch-made is the word I would use; and because Britain now has an organisation called the British Council which

intends to see that British Life and Thought is exhibited outside the United Kingdom, it becomes possible for us, who have so far been mere listeners-in on the remotest edge of western civilisation, to observe this epoch-made manifestation of western music just as if we had the same privileges as those who live in one of the centres of origin.

As it turns out (or has in Australia) our demand justifies the experiment. The orchestra's four is a practicable thing ("a paying proposition") and all we have to doff our caps to the British Council for is the chance to prove it. We do have to say "thank you for the lovely present," but at least we can hold our heads up, feeling we deserved it. (Or Australians can. I am only presuming that New Zealanders will be able to also.)

Rehearsal

I went into the Auckland Town Hall on the Saturday morning before the orchestra's first concert there. Cleaners



Sparrow Industrial photograph

The orchestra arrives by flying-boat at Auckland

were making a clatter with buckets and mops in the vestibule, and men with feather dusters were going along the rows flicking the dust of the previous night's symphony concert off the seats. The Boyd Neel orchestra was hovering among the last suspenseful chords of an *adagio* in Handel's Concerto Grosso No. 1. Just as I sat down, they came to that question-mark that holds you ready for what is to follow. Then Boyd

Neel started them on the *allegro*. That movement happens to be one of those fugal ones that dart off into what Boyd Neel would want me to call "a lively tune." As a matter of fact it has a touch of *Three Blind Mice* about it, just before the second "entry" (where the next lot of instruments come in), and Boyd Neel had decided to see how they ran. Frederick Grinke started the chase, the others followed with incredible zest, and the conductor stepped down, walked through the orchestra, up the choir seats, and round to the far side of the Circle, making for the back of the hall. He walked along through the alternate shafts of shadow and morning light, almost as if he were turning his back on some miraculous creation that had just sprung from his hand eager for life and was revelling in Speed as its first experience. I know that no moment in music was ever more exciting for me—"I never did see such a thing in my life."

I had heard the same kind of thing through gramophone records (and I had owned some of the Boyd Neel recordings). But this time I had gone to see how it was done, aware that I knew less than half of what there is to know about such an orchestra. What I saw led me to a clearer understanding of my own beliefs about the kind of music Boyd Neel plays, which largely as a result of his enterprise has become the platform of a sort of New Movement in music.

Force and Virtue

It is, I think, good for us to be reminded that that mighty creation of the 19th Century, the "Full Orchestra," is not the only medium for the prevailing musical expression of the time. In no way do I suggest that it should be abandoned. Obviously it never can be. But we must perceive, as England has, that between the full orchestra and the chamber music medium there is not an empty space at all, but another medium that has both the force of the one and the virtue of the other—the string orchestra, playing music from this unlimited store that Boyd Neel has rescued from neglect. I believe this music has something for us, specially appropriate at this time, which is not to be had from chamber music or symphonic music, and which we badly need.

It happens that in the same week in which I heard the Boyd Neel, I was also watching rehearsals of our own National Symphony Orchestra under Eugene Goossens. This orchestra is capable of playing much music that

Interview—

"The Orchestra's Run on Enthusiasm"

THE one question Boyd Neel dreads when reporters come at him is "And how was the orchestra founded?" He has tired of telling that story, because he happens to be a very modest man. He also wishes people would stop calling him "Dr." Boyd Neel. He practised medicine once, but doesn't now, and prefers to be "Mr." Neel, lest anyone think he poses as a doctor of music—which he is not. It would be hard to imagine anything further from what he is.

Although it amounted to asking him the very question that makes him throw his hands up, we did, however, try and discover from himself which was cause and which was effect in this matter of the modern string orchestra—which came first, the demand or the Boyd Neel? (But we might have known better. It is one of those historical queries that will never be quite answered.)

It is difficult now, when we hear so much music for strings, both modern and classical, to imagine how the musical scene was before 1933. But the fact is that there were only four or five pieces for the medium that were played then—Tchaikovsky's *Serenade*, Mozart's *Nachtmusik*, Bach's third *Brandenburg Concerto*, Arensky's *Variations on a Theme of Tchaikovsky*, and Vaughan Williams' *Fantasia on a Theme of Thomas Tallis*.

The reason why so little music for strings alone was being played, Mr. Neel told us, was partly that it was uneconomic for orchestras with full wood-

wind and brass to lay aside these players, but also and perhaps chiefly that the greater quantity of string music required an utterly different approach. It must be tackled as if it were chamber music (which it is).

"An orchestra that is going to do it well must be able to play it almost without a conductor. My orchestra can now. I often leave and go into the hall to hear how it sounds."

England's "Renaissance"

Having heard that Mr. Neel, while he was in Australia, had pricked the bubble of the "renaissance of music" in wartime England, we put a question about this.

It is "absolute rubbish," he says, to say that England went all music-loving overnight. Audiences there are back to normal now, and worse. The forces swelled wartime audiences and created a false boom—with help from what Mr. Neel has called "hysteria." Result: concert promoters sprang up to take advantage of it, and many are still in the field.

"Now," Mr. Neel says. "There are too many concerts and not enough audience."

It also had a bad effect on the taste shown in programmes. Infinite repetitions of "the Tchaikovsky Concerto," Beethoven's Fifth Symphony, etc., were sure sellers, cheapened such works, and made business bad all round.

"People don't go music-minded overnight," Mr. Neel says. "Why should they?"

"And so the Arts Council no longer rides on the wave, as CEMA did?"

"Far from it. It's reducing its grants all round. I get £250 to help me run my orchestra. That wouldn't pay a secretary's salary. If it hadn't been for friends of the orchestra, we'd have collapsed altogether on two or three occasions. When I landed in Sydney and

heard about the £60,000 subsidy for the orchestra there I nearly fainted."

The Boyd Neel Orchestra has only two of its original (1933) members still with it. Two members lost their lives in the war. And the group has "only just got going again now."

"Maurice Clare played with us twelve years ago. And he came to Paris with us not long ago. In fact, he really started with us. So there's a little bit of news for you."

"And what about the social side? How do you take 18 musicians round the world with you and stop them fighting?"

Boyd Neel laughed cheerfully.

"I don't. That's the answer to that one. No. Everyone's keen on the job, and they feel that's the main thing. The orchestra's run on enthusiasm."

We asked him to amplify what he had said on the air about jargon. When he objected to a musician talking about "An *allegro vivace* in B flat major," did he mean that composers like Britten and Walton (who both use Italian directions on their scores) should try and find English words to convey what they want?

"No, no. I mean in talking to ordinary people. I quite agree that the Italian term may convey a precise meaning to musicians that can't be got as well any other way. But I think a great deal of harm has been done by musicians talking to laymen and using their own technical terms. As far I know, music is the only profession where that's done. Engineers don't do it."

"It scares ordinary people off good music. They think: 'Highbrow!' And I don't blame them. I suppose it all started with people like Pachmann and Paderewski—poseurs, the long hair and flowing tie type, pretending that musicians are a people apart. It would be easier if people would only realise that the musician is a working man, a chap who does a job of work."



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